I know he has no need of my help, but I sometimes feel rather protective towards Richard Rorty. Especially when I see him being set upon by members of the realist old Left: the salt-of-the-earth socialist internationalists who enjoy looking back to the great days of organized labour, wringing their hands over yet another opportunist who has proved unequal to the struggle and sold out to the blandishments of bourgeoisdom. For those who like taking left offence, Rorty is a most dependable supplier of what turns them on.

But the comrades seem to me to have got the wrong end of the stick. For one thing they are unaware of Rorty’s funny side. He may or may not be, as Harold Bloom claimed, ‘the most interesting philosopher in the world today’, but he is certainly one of the drollest: a continuous tease, and just about the only philosopher who can make me laugh.

I particularly enjoy all those glum self-descriptions he goes in for, where ‘we Western leftists’, for instance, are made to coincide with ‘we bourgeois liberals’, and admonished, after ‘dumping Marx’, to become ‘more willing than we are to celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far.’ These reiterated ‘we’s’ may be questionable as statements of fact, but they are pretty effective as needles for puncturing pompous conceits: comic devices for winding up those of us who cannot bring ourselves to admit that our political righteousness may not be quite so self-evident when seen in its broad practical context, or when measured in terms of its long-range historical effects.

For those who get wound up by Rorty, he is guilty of three principal betrayals. One is that he has given up on all a priori universal necessities, and so cannot subscribe to any belief in natural human rights – a belief which they may well take to be historically and logically indispensable to any kind of progressive or critical politics, perhaps even for politics as such. Another is that, given his pragmatism or anti-foundationalism or anti-realism, he can never have any grounds for criticizing existing social relations: after all, if no description is necessitated by reality as such, then intolerable injustices will always be open to face-saving redescriptions that will make them out to be inevitable or even desirable. And the other dereliction – perhaps gravest of all from the point of view of solemn European leftists – is that Rorty is not ashamed of being a citizen of the United States of America, and indeed that he has called on his fellow citizens to ‘rejoice’ in their Americanness and build up their ‘shared sense of national identity’ by yielding to the ‘emotion of national pride’.

The point about Americanism can perhaps be disposed of quite quickly. The patriotic Rorty does not deny that there has been massive unnecessary unhappiness in the history of the United States both at home and abroad. Maybe he is only saying – quite plausibly, I should have thought – that if you compare the actually existing legal and political systems of different countries and rank them according to their ability to tackle injustices old and new, then those of the United States must come pretty near the top. No doubt the inheritors of the American revolution have something to learn from the inheritors of the English, French, Russian or Chinese ones; but the learning should not be all one way. And we European leftists may need to guard against an anti-Americanism that comes very easily to us: it may after all have more to do with a Euro-aristocratic disdain for uppity colonials than with support for the cause of the oppressed, including the oppressed in the United States.

The idea that Rorty does not treat human suffering with sufficient gravity is based on another misunderstanding. Roy Bhaskar thinks that Rorty’s anti-realism must automatically lead to ‘an apologia for, and so normalization, and thence eternalization (and so divinization) of the social status quo’. That is a surprising and improbable description of one of philosophy’s most effective controversialists, but Bhaskar is so exasperated by Rorty that he can only taunt him with hysterical questions, as if he were a kind of stony-hearted political Scrooge: ‘how about a famine’, he asks, or ‘an earthquake or a stillborn child?’

Bhaskar has obviously mistaken the character of the argument here. Rortyan pragmatists will no doubt
be anti-realists about famines, but that does not make them into postmodern Marie Antoinettes, telling the hungry they must make do with words should they ever run out of bread. Their pragmatism will be perfectly even-handed, applying to food as well as famine, and in practice the two anti-realisms will cancel each other out. And if activism is to be our criterion, then one might suppose that a pragmatist conception of food and famine will be a more effective spur to action than a realist investigation into their essential nature.

Much the same can be said of the other betrayal they accuse Rorty of: his refusal to worship the idea of universal human rights. 'If there is no truth, there is no injustice', according to Norman Geras, another wound-up realist leftist. 'If truth is wholly relativized or internalized to particular discourses or language games or social practices', Geras says, then 'there is no injustice.' But the pragmatist argument is not that we should turn our back on absolute truth; it is that, however much we may regret it, it is not on offer anyway. Now the pragmatists may be right and they may be wrong – it is after all a very abstract dispute, way above the heads of most of us. But it is surely both petulant and self-destructive to suggest, with Geras, that if they eventually win the meta-philosophical argument then the struggle against injustice should be called off. Indeed the boot would seem to be on the other foot: if direct activism is what you want, then surely it is better to let it be motivated by immediate ‘sentimentality’, rather than stand around waiting for the always uncertain results of a rationalistic calculus whose bottom line may never come.

But Rorty may not thank me for my attempts to fend off his left-realist attackers. My services come at a price, I’m afraid. We ironist pessimist Marxists – if I can make my own bid at persuasive self-definition – may be willing, for example, to consider his case respectfully when he compares the political system of the United States with other ones elsewhere. But such global comparisons will need to be discussed in a quite carefully differentiated vocabulary of social description, with a high degree of historical self-awareness – and in that case Rorty has no business to dismiss social theory a priori, or to speak so robustly about ‘dumping Marx’.

And secondly, if the serious realists are wrong to imagine that pragmatism undermines the possibility of committed social and political action, it is only because pragmatism does not make much practical difference one way or the other. No one but a true-believing realist metaphysician has any cause to worry about the nature and definition of metaphysics. And it is hard to see why a Rortyan pragmatist should be the slightest bit interested in dividing books into two separate piles, the realist and the anti-realist, with Plato and Marx and Mill in one pile and Dewey, Dickens and Proust in the other. Surely only a metaphysician of the kind Rorty most deeply wants not to be could suppose that doctrines fall into unambiguous natural kinds. In any case, the issue is not so much which books to read, as how they ought to be read. Would-be post-philosophers intent on reinventing themselves as ironists still have a long way to go if they have not yet conquered their reality-anxiety sufficiently to give up on the distinction between books that are metaphysical and books that are not. If I were ever to invite comrade Rorty to make a self-criticism, in short, it would not be for being too anti-realist, but for not being anti-realist enough.

The same applies to Rorty’s needling of the idea of universal natural human rights. There is indeed no point in pretending not to be ethnocentric: we cannot not make judgements, and the fact that our opinions are always going to be the opinions of someone coming from where we come from is hardly a reason for holding them back. Otherwise, as Rorty says, we will be so open-minded that our brains fall out. And that is why Rorty is happy with the idea that the language of human rights is nothing except a metaphysically puffed up appeal to our capacity for sentimental identification with other people – an identification that may need to be worked up and practised upon by journalists and novelists, according to him, but which is beyond the reach of the moral and political philosophers he likes to dump into the skip labelled metaphysics.
Rorty is probably right to say that ‘feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient’, and to add that ‘such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary.’ But he is wrong to think that this anti-universalism, or anti-anti-ethnocentrism, provides any support for his values of patriotism or nationalism. Rorty evokes American liberal concern for poor young blacks in American cities. ‘Do we say that these people must be helped because they are our fellow human beings?’ he asks. ‘We may, but it is much more persuasive, morally as well as politically, to describe them as our fellow Americans – to insist that it is outrageous that a fellow American should live without hope.’

Rorty seriously underestimates the complexities of the sympathetic imagination here. Why assume, for instance, that we can feel solidarity only with those whom we take to be similar to us? Surely we are all susceptible to sympathies that jump straight over our neighbours and peers and equals and familiars to people we take to be totally unkith and unkin? Otherness can be a motive for love and passion as well as hatred or indifference, and distance is often a positive aid to identification. Weeping children whose language you cannot even understand, and whose haircuts and clothing you cannot decipher, may be far more affecting than the ungrateful snivelling kids in expensive trainers who jostle on your street corner smoking cigarettes and asking for money, shouting insults at you, and trashing cars. If you are to summon up some sympathy for these co-nationals, and stop hating them as the spiteful violent racists you immediately know them to be, you will have to make an effort to see them hazily and indefinitely, as if through bobbly glass: to apprehend them metaphysically, in short, and purely as abstract human beings.

In any case, the positive concept of ‘nation’ which Rorty thinks should structure our sentiments and sympathies surely divides us up in all the wrong ways. Once again, he seems not to have quite conquered his old realist longings. The principle of nationality may be a very recent conceptual fabrication, but it is surely the most metaphysical way of grouping people together that was ever invented. Your nationality is an attribute you are stuck with purely in virtue of your birth. It is probably harder to change than your sex; and under the modern world system it is absolutely compulsory that you should have one, whether you like it or not. Presumably what Rorty is reaching out for when he speaks of patriotism and national feeling is an idea of bonds of solidarity that are local and affective and particular and plural; but what he actually picks up is quite the opposite: for whilst the principle of nationality fosters national differences around the globe, it enforces local uniformity within the nation.

Rorty rightly mocks those old leftists who can think of nothing beyond their ‘wish to nationalise the means of production’. Why then is he intent on nationalizing the sources of social solidarity? You may think I am just playing on words here, but in fact the two kinds of nationalization are structurally exactly the same. In economic arrangements as in sentiments of solidarity, the advocates of nationalization assume that the only choice lies between privatization based on the isolated individual and nationalization based on the conglomerated nation.

If we want to free ourselves from this prejudice, and broaden our bourgeois liberal experience a little, then we could do worse than read Marx on the manifold variousness of the forms of property and belonging that have been potentialized and actualized in the course of history. We might even find ourselves nodding in belated recognition at Marx’s prescient descriptions of nationalization – of how separate capitals within a national economy can be amalgamated into ‘communal capital’, with ‘the community as a universal capitalist’.

Unfortunately, Rorty would deny us access to such intellectual resources, on the ground that we cannot have anything to learn from books of ‘philosophical theory’ written by ‘metaphysicians like Plato and Marx’. We should avoid such ‘deep thinkers’, he says, and lend an ear instead to such ‘superficial dreamers’ as the political novelists H.G. Wells and Edward Bellamy.

Surely this is perverse. We may agree with Rorty that the idea of national planning by experts accountable only to other experts was one of the great disasters of twentieth-century progressive politics; but surely no one did more to put it into the susceptible heads of socialists, a century or so ago, than the novelists at the top of Rorty’s alternative reading list. It was Wells who tried to bludgeon socialists into what he called a ‘delocalized’ mentality as opposed to a ‘localized’ one, and it was he who in 1912 put forward the idea that ‘we need nothing less than a National Plan of social development’. And Wells did not derive these national-statist notions from that ‘malicious theorist’ Marx, as he called him. Marx, for Wells, was a sinister anti-statist who offered ‘to the cheapest and basest of human impulses the poses of a pretentious philosophy’. If anything, Wellsian ideas of scientific national plan-
ning were taken from the other novelistic authors Rorty recommends, most notably Edward Bellamy.20

Bellamy’s Looking Backward, published in 1888, is the story of ‘How Socialism Came to the United States’, told from the vantage point of the year 2000. It is very probably the first work explicitly to link the idea of socialism with that of a ‘National Party’ whose programme would be, in so many words, to ‘nationalize the functions of production and distribution’. The National Party, in Bellamy’s Bostonian Utopia, had established socialism by first routing the Reds (in the pay of the capitalists, of course, for their services in making socialist rationality repulsive to the masses) and then establishing the American ‘nation … as the one great business corporation … the one capitalist in the place of all other capitalists.’21

Bellamy’s dream of socialist national efficiency strikes me as a nightmare, recalling Marx’s premonition of the ‘universal capitalist’, and I cannot quite understand Rorty’s affection for it. Of course he may think I am being too literal-minded: after all Looking Backward is a time-travel love story, not a philosophical treatise. But it is hard to see why that difference in generic category should be any excuse: on the contrary, it was precisely the numbing of critical intelligence by such political fairy tales that enabled national-authoritarian delusions to enter the practice of the socialist activists of the twentieth century in the first place.

And surely these tragically unironic socialists – honoured by Rorty as ‘the most decent, the most devoted, the most admirable people of their times’22 – would have been well advised to think a little harder than either Wells or Bellamy encouraged them to do. It is a pity they were not a little more suspicious of that most metaphysical of ideas – the idea of a homogeneous nation – and that they accepted it as the foundation both for human solidarity and for the ownership of the means of production. They would have done better to neglect the credulous novelists, and attend to such great sceptical ironists as Plato, Mill and Marx instead.

Notes
This is the text of a talk given at an ‘Encounter with Richard Rorty’, organized by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster in May 1997.

3. ‘There seems no particular reason why, after dumping Marx, we have to keep on repeating all the nasty things about bourgeois liberalism which he taught us to say.’ See ‘Method, Social Science, Social Hope’ (1981), in Consequences of Pragmatism, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982, p. 207.
10. ‘We have to start from where we are’, as Rorty rightly says; see Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 198.
17. Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, p. 120.
18. ‘One can … privatise philosophy, and say that when it comes to the communal self-reassurance of the modern democratic societies, most of the work gets done not by deep thinkers (e.g. people attracted by Plato and Kant) but by superficial dreamers – people like Edward Bellamy, Henry George, H.G. Wells, Michael Harrington, Martin Luther King.’ See Rorty’s review of Jürgen Habermas, Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne, in London Review of Books, 3 September 1987, pp. 11–12.
22. ‘The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism’, p. 10.